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U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk is leading a congressional effort to ease federal rules restricting charitable gifts to military personnel.

Kirk and other lawmakers are concerned the regulations - requiring soldiers to obtain written authorization before accepting gifts worth more than \$20 - will discourage civilian donations to troops serving in the Middle East, especially those wounded in the war on terror.

They are drafting legislation that will allow for a broader interpretation of ethics rules designed to prevent bribery of military personnel.

"We want to make sure the government gives gifts of more than a folded flag," said Kirk, a Highland Park Republican.

Kirk, a Naval Reserves intelligence officer, was at the Pentagon when he heard the restrictions were being enforced at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center. The rules have been in place since 1993 but only became an issue recently because of the rising wartime casualties, he said. Kirk was stunned by the decision to implement the policy.

"I thought, 'No Army lawyer could be this stupid,'æ" he said.

Last week, Kirk and other legislators wrote to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and requested the "senseless restriction" be lifted. Among them was U.S. Rep. John Shimkus, a Republican from downstate Collinsville.

A West Point graduate and an Army Reserves officer, Shimkus sympathized with wounded soldiers who usually are hospitalized without any personal belongings. To restrict civilian donations of toiletries, books, DVDs and other items because they cost more than \$20 doesn't make sense, he said.

"How many pieces of chewing gum do you want?" Shimkus said. "Regardless of individuals'

feelings about the war, the public wants to be supportive (of the troops). This is a way they can be supportive."

U.S. Rep. Rahm Emanuel, a Chicago Democrat, also signed the letter and is developing his own legislative fix.

"If you honor (soldiers) in words, you have to honor them in acts," Emanuel said.

Kirk has spoken with Rumsfeld about the ban and said the defense secretary agrees change is needed. A Defense Department spokeswoman said the Pentagon "appreciates Congress' efforts to eliminate unintended impediments."

The revisions Kirk has proposed could be tacked onto an upcoming bill and enacted by Thanksgiving, he said.

"(That's) when the gifts start rolling in," Kirk said.

Anna Sherony, a Wadsworth woman who runs a support group for wounded troops and their families called Wounded Soldiers, is grateful for the legislative intervention. Her group sends disposable cameras, stationery sets and other items to convalescing soldiers and pays for morale-boosting trips, and she was worried those donations would have to stop.

"I'm so excited that they're fixing this as quickly as possible," she said.